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Transmitted via Email

July 27, 2007

MINNESOTA BULLETIN NO. 300-7-22

SUBJECT: LTP – GRASSLAND RESERVE PROGRAM (GRP)

Purpose. To distribute information on the Fiscal Year (FY)-2007 GRP sign-up, scoring and approval process.

Expiration Date. September 30, 2007

Action Required by August 17, 2007

Minnesota has just received funds to conduct a statewide FY-2007 sign-up for the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). Applications will be accepted by all NRCS and FSA field offices from July 23 through August 17. NRCS staff need to coordinate the sign-up promotion and program marketing activities with their local FSA co-workers.

Eligible producers must show that they have control of the land for the period of the requested rental agreement. Eligible applications will be limited to 10, 15, and 20-year rental agreements. These funds CANNOT be used for either 30-year rental agreements or easements.

Special priority will be given in the scoring and ranking process to applicants that complete an optional self certification form documenting they meet the criteria of one of the following producer categories:

- Tribal lands and Tribal producers;
- Limited Resource producers;
- Beginning Farmers – To receive priority recognition as a “beginning farmer” for this GRP sign-up individuals must self-certify that they meet ALL of the following conditions;
 - ✓ they are actively involved in a “separate” farming entity in which they are responsible for the farm labor, management and financial decisions and;
 - ✓ they have been involved in this entity for less then 10 years (January 1, 1997 to present) and;
 - ✓ their average “gross farm sales” and “total household” income over the previous 2-year period (2005 – 2006) is less then **3-times** the county qualifying income eligibility level as defined for a limited resource farmer on the USDA web site

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and the majority (at least 51%) of total household income is derived from their farm operation.

http://www.lrftool.sc.egov.usda.gov/tool.asp?state_name=Minnesota&step=1&contents=t1&hardcopy=&B1=Next

All participants self certifying that they meet the above listed criteria for priority consideration are subject to verification, which could include submission of IRS forms and Income Tax documentation.

Applicants who choose to document their eligibility as a limited resource or beginning farmer should be given assistance with the USDA self-determination tool. After they have answered the questions on the web link have them print out the document and also complete the optional GRP self certification for priority consideration form, which is attached to this bulletin.

Participants who have previously submitted GRP applications, from all prior year sign-ups, will NOT be automatically considered for funding unless they submit a new application. State Office listings of prior-year unfunded participants will be distributed to Area Offices. This pool of producers can be notified of the current sign-up.

All applications with scores above **100 points** will be immediately forwarded to Ginger Kopp in the State Office to be considered for tentative approval. All applications, regardless of score, must be in the State Office by COB on August 17, 2007.

Prior to final approval all tentatively approved applications will have the score they received on their original application, and the associated acreage and financial assistance funds, verified by an in-field review by the District Conservationist. Once these items have been verified, the District Conservationist will confirm the information with the State Office by contacting Ginger Kopp, State Forester, at (651) 602-7909 before proceeding with offering the applicant a contract.

Responsibilities

In GRP NRCS is responsible to take sign-up applications, score and rank all applications, determine the extent of eligible land, and develop a prescribed grazing conservation plan. **For 2007 approvals NRCS is to get completed GRP plans to FSA as soon as possible, but no later then September 4.**

FSA is responsible to measure the eligible areas, as identified by NRCS, to determine the acreage, complete the AGI certification, complete contract documents and issue payments.

Sign-up Requirements and Forms

Eligible GRP participants can apply by submitting:

- 1) Form AD-1153, which is available through the following web link and;
http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/grp/grp05/AD1153_revGRP.pdf
- 2) Completing the GRP questionnaire, which is attached and;
- 3) If appropriate, completing the optional GRP applicant self certification for priority consideration form.

Eligible Land

The GRP statute provides that eligible land includes privately owned: grasslands; land that contains forbs; shrubland (including improved rangeland and pastureland); and land that is located in an area that has been historically dominated by grassland, forbs or shrubland when these lands have the potential to enhance plant and animal biodiversity. Land that is currently cropland could potentially be eligible under this last category if restored to grass. For FY 2007, due to limited funds, non-grassland acres will not be eligible for enrollment unless those acres are restored to a grassland status at no cost to USDA. If landowners or other conservation partners pay for all restoration costs, non grassland acres are eligible for enrollment. Non-profit organizations are eligible to offer land for GRP providing the land is considered privately owned.

Only those acres in grassland, or considered capable of producing forage, are eligible for GRP payments. Adjacent or contiguous acres which do not meet this definition (such as open water, non-grazeable wetlands, forestland, pens and corrals) can be enrolled but are not eligible to receive GRP rental payments. When these areas are enrolled they are also subject to proper land management and conservation planning considerations which could limit their availability for grazing.

Use the following list of definitions to assist with determining if privately owned lands are eligible for enrollment.

Eligible lands include:

Grassland means land on which the vegetation is dominated by grasses, grass-like plants and/or forbs.

Forb means any herbaceous plant other than those in the grass family.

Rangeland means land on which the native vegetation (climax or natural potential) is predominantly grasses, grass-like plants, forbs or shrubs suitable for grazing or browsing use. Rangelands include natural grassland, savannas, wet meadows, and introduced plant communities managed like rangeland.

Hayland means land in forage production that is managed through an annual mechanical harvesting process. These acres are generally dominated by legumes which may need to be enhanced, with or without cost share assistance, during the life of the agreement or easement.

Shrubland means a type of rangeland dominated by small woody perennial plants.

Wooded Grasslands (including Oak Savanna) are lands which have a predominant grass under story which currently produces grass forage and scattered or small clumps of woody vegetation.

Cropland is land in annual crop production that is eligible when restored to grassland status without USDA funding assistance.

Ineligible lands include:

Grazed Forestland or wood lots that do not have a “predominant” under story of grass that currently can be utilized as grass forage.

Other lands which are not currently producing forage, and will not be restored to grassland, or that are not capable of producing forage.

Existing Contracts for land with an EQIP, CRP or WHIP contract

A number of questions have been asked regarding land with an EQIP, CRP, CSP or WHIP contract being offered for GRP. Generally, if a person is contractually required to maintain

grassland through an existing USDA conservation program, the land is not eligible for GRP until the contractual obligation ceases to exist. Lands under contract in CRP, WRP and active EQIP with current or future year scheduled “prescribed grazing” as a contract item will always be ineligible for GRP.

In EQIP and WHIP if the contractual obligation has either expired or is for something other than maintaining grassland, and the requirements for enrollment in both programs can be conducted without interference, the GRP application can be accepted and the land enrolled in the program. For example, if an EQIP contract is for structural practices, such as a trough, pipeline or fencing, and there are no requirements associated with maintaining the grassland in the contract, the application is eligible. If there are cost-shared or non cost-shared practices that are associated with maintaining the grass such as prescribed burning or prescribed grazing or pasture management, the application is not eligible until the EQIP contract expires. We will address situations on a case-by-case basis for participants who want to enroll land into GRP that is currently in another USDA conservation program.

Field staff should consider notifying previous EQIP participants, with an expired EQIP contract, that successfully established and/or implemented a prescribed grazing management system.

Lands Needing Restoration

Restoration or lands requiring restoration are eligible for the program. Due to limited funding, Minnesota will not make GRP funds available to cost share any restoration or enhancement activities (such as seeding, fencing, pipelines, water facilities, etc.) in FY 2007. In future years we may develop a cost share docket for the GRP. At that time, GRP contracts may be eligible to receive cost share assistance for restoration and enhancement activities.

Conservation Plan Requirements

GRP is a conservation program and all enrolled acres are required to be managed under a conservation plan that is developed to ensure the protection of the environmental benefits being purchased by USDA. The 2007 GRP criteria are attached to this bulletin. Landowners who are uncomfortable with these criteria may want to exclude some of their grassland from the program, especially if their forage needs conflict with program requirements.

NRCS is responsible to develop a conservation plan on all approved contracts. GRP plans will have practices 528, Prescribed Grazing and/or 511, Forage Harvest Management along with 647, Early Successional Habitat Management planned and maintained for the life of the contract. All enrolled acres will require active management such as managed haying, grazing, seed harvesting, burning, weed control and other measures to maintain the grass cover in a manner consistent with quality conservation.

GRP provisions exclude haying and seed harvesting during the nesting season. Haying and seed harvesting are not allowed to occur from June 1 to August 1. Season-long grazing is allowed and encouraged when conducted according to the approved prescribed grazing plan.

Land enrolled in GRP may not be tilled and reseeded to enhance the cover for any use. Enrolled acres may be renovated or enhanced by interseeding or through a no-till seeding technique which does not invert the soil surface.

This information has been reviewed and concurred with by the FSA State Office, and should be shared with your local FSA personnel. Direct any questions on the information in this bulletin to Paul Flynn, SRC.

Distributed with this bulletin are the following 2007 GRP documents;

- 2007 GRP Planning Criteria
- GRP Sign-up Press Release
- GRP Rental Rates
- GRP Application Questionnaire
- GRP Scoring Sheet
- Optional Applicant Self Certification for priority consideration

/s/

WILLIAM HUNT
State Conservationist

Attachments

DIST: AC
FO
Greg Anderson, FSA, St. Paul, MN
Mn.graze
Ginger Kopp, State Forester, St. Paul, MN